



An Early Learning User's Guide For Illinois School Boards

Ultimately, school boards are responsible for ensuring that all children in their districts succeed in school and go on to success in college and careers. Investments in quality early childhood education services, from birth through age five, can be one of the most cost-effective strategies for school districts to fulfill their overall objective. Integrating early learning programs into the district's educational continuum can have significant positive long-term effects on child outcomes.

Why Early Learning Matters

Research has shown that the achievement gap between students in poverty and those in higher socioeconomic environments begins in the first few months of life, and can be significant even before a child turns 1 or 2 years old. Without intervention, this gap can persist throughout a child's academic career. It is also important that early learning programs can have long-term impacts on children in both the "academic" and "non-academic" domains. Well designed and implemented early learning programs help young children develop a foundation of social and emotional skills that will enable them to succeed as academic rigor increases throughout their school career. The same skills that children learn before kindergarten about cooperation have been proven to translate into their abilities to work in teams and problem solve as teenagers and adults.

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Key Principles for School Boards in Supporting Early Learning

School boards that want meaningful long term outcomes will need to be thoughtful in their design and implementation of early learning programs to ensure that they are effectively investing in programs that will contribute to the district's long-term goals. Districts will be most effective in supporting early learning if they do so in a manner that is in alignment with their overarching goals for students, and that is responsive to the needs of their community. There are questions that school boards can ask to guide the planning:

- What is the current status of early learning in the community?
- How is the district—in consultation with community partners—articulating what it is trying to achieve in early learning in conjunction with district goals for students in later years?
- What steps need to be taken for the district to achieve its goals?

The school board should first assess the needs and resources that exist within the district. The board can then articulate a vision for early education that builds on existing community resources and is sensitive to local context. This vision for early childhood should be integrated into the overall educational vision for the district, with consensus about how success will be measured.

How Districts can Use Early Learning Investments to Improve Student Outcomes and Close the Achievement Gap

Districts can play a primary role in early learning either through providing services directly or through establishing community partnerships that strengthen early childhood systems and promote high-quality early education. Within each of these roles, districts have numerous strategic choices that they can make to establish high-quality early learning opportunities that are connected to the K-12 education system. Districts can directly provide early childhood services in three ways:

1. Directly operating early childhood programs—targeting 3- and 4-year-olds and/or children ages birth-to-three, using state and/or federal funding sources
2. Providing grants to community-based providers that demonstrate quality standards
3. Offering in-kind supports, such as space, transportation, or medical services to community-based providers who may not be able to readily access them

In its role as a service provider, the district can play a role in increasing the number of high-quality early childhood programs in the community, ensuring that children feeding into district level schools have benefited from enriching early-education experiences that promote school readiness and lay the foundation for academic success in later grades.

In addition to acting as a service provider, school districts can partner with the local early learning community to improve the quality of programs

and strengthen systems. School districts can perform this role through strategies such as:

- Partnering with community infant-toddler programs to unify local service providers around quality requirements that are connected to definitions of kindergarten readiness and learning standards
- Inviting early learning providers to professional development opportunities, which can improve understanding kindergarten expectations, inform elementary teachers on early learning instructional approaches, and smooth the transition from early learning to early elementary
- Leading conversations about transition practices that are framed by student and classroom level data and guided by the district's legal responsibility in transition planning for students with special needs

In its partnership role with community programs, the school district can not only improve the quality of local programs, but also strengthen the connections between early learning and early elementary. School districts can pursue some or all of the highlighted approaches as a part of their early learning strategy.

The full guide offers more details about each of these approaches and questions a school board can ask itself in determining the best approach for the community, with an appendix summarizing key early learning funding opportunities that districts can seek to leverage.

For the full guide, please visit:

www.iasb.com/earlylearning
www.theOunce.org/schoolboards

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